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GRIEG

Piano Music Vol. 9

Lyric Pieces
Opp. 54, 57 and 62

Einar Steen-Nøkleberg, Piano

Edvard Grieg (1843 - 1907)

Piano Music Vol. 9

Lyric Pieces

Lyriske stykker, hefte 5, op. 54 (Lyric Pieces, Book 5, Op. 54)

1. Gjetergut (Herdboy)
2. Gangar (Norwegian March)
3. Trolltog (March of the Trolls)
4. Notturno (Nocturne)
5. Scherzo
6. Klokkeklang (Bellringing)

Lyriske stykker, hefte 6, op. 57 (Lyric Pieces, Book 6, Op. 57)

1. Svunne dager (Vanished Days)
2. Gade
3. Illusjon (Illusion)
4. Hemmelighet (Secret)
5. Hun danser (She dances)
6. Hjemve (Nostalgia)

Lyriske stykker, hefte 7, op. 62 (Lyric Pieces, Book 7, Op. 62)

1. Sylfide (Sylph)
2. Tak (Gratitude)
3. Fransk serenade (French Serenade)
4. Bekken (Brooklet)
5. Drömmesyn (Phantom)
6. Hjemad (Homeward)

Edvard Grieg was born in Bergen, on the west coast of Norway in 1843. He showed a strong interest in music at a very early age, and after encouragement from the violinist and composer Ole Bull (1810 - 1880) was sent to the Conservatory in Leipzig at the age of fifteen to receive his musical education. There he had fundamental and solid musical training, and through the city's flourishing musical life, received impressions and heard music which would come to leave its stamp

on him for the rest of his life - for better or for worse. Even though he severely criticized the Leipzig Conservatory, especially towards the end of his life, in reality his exceptional gifts were recognised, and one sees in his sketchbooks of the Leipzig period that he had the freedom to experiment as well. He had no good reason to criticize the conservatory, nor his teachers, for poor teaching or a lack of understanding.

From Leipzig Grieg travelled to Copenhagen, bringing with him the solid musical training he had acquired, and there soon became known as a promising young composer. It was not long before he came under the influence of Rikard Nordraak, whose glowing enthusiasm and unshakeable belief that the key to a successful future for Norwegian music lay in nationalism, in the uniquely Norwegian, the music of the people - folk-songs - came to play a decisive rôle in Grieg's development as a composer. Nordraak's influence is most obvious in the *Humoresques for piano, Op. 6*, which was considered a turning-point in Grieg's career as a composer.

In the autumn of 1866, Grieg settled in Christiania (Oslo). In 1874 Norway's capital was the centre for his activities. During this time he also wrote the majority of the works which laid the foundation for his steadily increasing fame. In spite of his poor health - he had had a defective lung ever since childhood - he was constantly on concert-tour as a pianist or as a conductor, always with his own works on the programme. After his last concert-tour in 1907, he wrote to his friend Frants Beyer:

This Tour has been strange. The Audiences have been on my Side. In Germany I have received more acclaim for my ART than ever before. But the Critics both in Munich and in Berlin have let me know in no uncertain terms, that they think I am a dead Man. That is my punishment for my lack of Productivity in these last Years, which my wretched physical condition has caused. It is a hard and undeserved Punishment - but I comfort myself with the thought that it is not the Critics, who govern the world. (Letter to Frants Beyer, 5th March, 1907)

More clearly than anything else, this letter shows a trend which Grieg experienced in his later years in relation to his music. It was also a development which would continue internationally until long after his death. Within the musical establishment, there were increasing numbers of people who were gradually

becoming more critical of Grieg's music and of his abilities and talent as a composer. In the meantime his popularity among music-loving audiences increased in inverse proportion. Grieg enjoyed some of his greatest popularity with the general public during the last years of his life, when, in spite of his greatly weakened health, he was continually on tour, in popular demand from concert-managers all over the world. The critics, however, were sceptical and condescending, and there is no doubt that Grieg felt hurt by their attitude:

I cannot be blamed if my music is played in third-rate hotels and by school-girls. I could not have created my music any other way, even though I did not have my audience in mind at the time. I guess this popularity is all right, but it is dearly bought. My reputation as a composer is suffering because of it, and the criticism is disparaging. [1]

From early on Grieg was labelled a composer of small forms. His indisputable lyrical ability and talent were never doubted, but apart from some very few works such as the *Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 16*, and the *String Quartet in G minor, Op. 27*, the *Piano Sonata in E minor, Op. 7*, the three *Violin Sonatas, Op. 8 in F major, Op. 13 in G major and Op. 45 in C minor*, and the *Cello Sonata in A minor, Op. 36*, he was not able, in spite of his many desperate attempts to do so , to feel completely at home with more extended musical forms. He felt that this was a short-coming, and unfairly blamed his education at the Leipzig Conservatory. Nevertheless, he also showed that he could master these forms when on rare occasions he found raw musical material that could be reworked and treated within the traditional structure of sonata-form. The only problem was that the musical material to which he felt closest and that most fascinated him, was of another quality and character.

Grieg's encounter with Norwegian folk-music, and his assimilation of essential features from this music, released certain aspects of his own creativity that soon led to his music being, for many, identified with folk-music. By some he was considered more or less simply an arranger of folk-music, and that hurt him very deeply:

In my Op. 17 and Op. 66, I have arranged folk-songs for the piano, in Op. 30, I have freely rendered folk-ballads for the male voice. In three or four of my remaining works, I have attempted to use Norwegian songs thematically. And since I have published up to

seventy works by now, I should be allowed to say that nothing is more incorrect than the claim from German critics that my so-called originality is limited to my borrowing from folk-music. It is quite another thing if a nationalistic spirit, which has been expressed through folk-music since ancient times, hovers over my original creative works. [2]

Much instrumental Norwegian folk-music is built from small melodic themes, units which are repeated with small variations in appoggiaturas and sometimes with rhythmic displacements. Sections are then joined together to form larger units. We seldom find any true development as it is understood in traditional classical music. It gradually became clear to Grieg that he felt the greatest affinity with this music. That is why it also became so difficult to distinguish between what in Grieg's works came originally from folk-music, and what was his own composition. This must also have been especially difficult for foreign critics and audiences.

In Grieg's music there are two features which particularly attract our attention, rhythm and harmony. In many instances Grieg's rhythm in his piano compositions is taken from the folk-dance, as well as from compositions which are not based upon folk-music. He placed great emphasis on the rhythmic element, and considered it paramount in the presentation of his works which have dance as the point of departure. He was of the opinion that in order to be able to play one of his compositions, one had to know and feel the dance rhythm. Characteristic of his understanding of the rhythmic element is the story about the meeting between Grieg and Ravel in Paris, in 1894, at the home of William Molard:

While the bright-eyed company discussed music, Ravel quietly went over to Molard's piano and began to play one of the master's Norwegian Dances. Grieg listened with a smile, but then began to show signs of impatience, suddenly getting up and saying sharply: "No, young man, not like that at all. Much more rhythm. It's a folk-dance, a peasant dance. You should see the peasants at home, with a fiddler stamping in time with music. Play it again! And while Ravel played, the little man jumped up and skipped about the room to the astonishment of the company.[3]

Harmony is at the heart of his work. Often it is the harmony itself which is the basis of the composition. Grieg pointed this out emphatically in a letter to his biographer, Henry T. Finck:

The realm of harmony, has always been my dream world, and my relationship to this harmonious way of feeling and the Norwegian folk-songs has been a mystery even for me. I have understood that the secret depth one finds in our folk-songs is basically owing to the richness of their untold harmonic possibilities. In my reworking of the folk-songs Op. 66, but also elsewhere, I have attempted to express my interpretation of the hidden harmonies in our folk-songs.[4]

Grieg's interest in harmony had become obvious to others already while he was at the Conservatory. At that time it was first and foremost a desire to experiment. Later harmony became his way of bringing forth the very "soul" of the folk-tunes. Among other things, he deliberately used unfamiliar, "radical" chord progressions in order to suggest the vague tonality (*sotto voce* half tones, vague thirds) such as one finds in many of the songs, a melodic characteristic which would otherwise be impossible from an instrument like the piano.

Grieg's instrument was primarily the piano. From his earliest years to the concert-tour in the year he died, he performed as a pianist his own compositions. He was not a virtuoso, but his intimate familiarity with the piano allowed him to present his own music in such a way as to leave a deep and lasting impression upon everyone who heard him play. According to contemporary reports he had a marvellous ability to bring out the best, the very essence, of his own piano pieces. When he took his place on the platform, the atmosphere became electric, and the critics emphasized his refined touch, tone quality, and the complete absence of superficial gestures.

Grieg's music contributed very modestly to the development of piano technique. Most of his piano pieces are technically speaking within the abilites of competent amateurs. This, together with musical characteristics which seem to have a stimulating and refreshing effect, contributed to the fact that he was one of the most played, and respected composers in Europe - popular, if not with the critics, then at least with the majority of those interested in music.

Grieg's compositions were written in the epoch of the piano. Music and piano-playing in the average home were at a peak during the last half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of this century. Cyril Ehrlich has calculated that in 1910 alone more than 600,000 pianos were produced. To know how to play the

piano was part of the general education in most middle-class families, especially for girls. No wonder the music publishers C. F. Peters hoisted the flag in London and Frankfurt every time Grieg delivered a manuscript for a new album of piano pieces. It is also understandable that Grieg sometimes experienced the demand for new piano pieces as a strain. There were also times when he felt that the production of piano pieces was a sort of bribe, or indulgence, to make sure that the publishing-house issued his other works as well. Nevertheless, in general, Grieg had an excellent relationship with his publisher in Leipzig. He was particularly close to Dr. Max Abraham (1831 - 1900), who became editor at Peters in 1863. This is clearly shown by the abundant correspondence that has been preserved. *Verlagsbuchhandlung C. F. Peters Bureau de Musique*, was the full name of the publishing-house that acted as Grieg's exclusive publisher from 1890 and agreed to pay him 4000 Marks every year, a sum which was adjusted to 6000 Marks in 1901. In return, Grieg was to offer Peters all of his future compositions with rights, *für allen Länder* (for all countries), for a certain fee.

Grieg experienced a great deal of adversity during certain periods of his life, but he also had more success than most other composer colleagues of his time. Nevertheless he never lost the feelings of unrest, of not having developed his talent to the full degree, of having left something undone, something unfulfilled within himself. Throughout his life, Grieg was a restless soul. He never felt completely at peace anywhere. When he was in Bergen, he longed for Christiania, and when he was there he longed for Copenhagen and the continent. When he was abroad, he longed to be back home, but no sooner had he arrived in Bergen than he felt oppressed and restless and wanted to go off again. There were perhaps only two places where he really felt at home and satisfied, on the concert-platform and in the Norwegian mountains, especially Jotunheimen. When he was in the presence of his audience or experiencing the powerful and free nature of the western part of Norway, he felt whole and complete.

Among Grieg's works the *Lyric Pieces* seem to have a special place with a special significance in their order. That he apparently viewed them in the same way is clear from the fact that his last lyrical piece, *Remembrances, Op. 71, No.7*, quotes his first piece, *Arietta, Op. 12, No. 1.* Thus the circle is completed, marking

the end of the period in which he was concerned with this type of piano piece, a type that the whole world loved, admired, and above all, played. Even though he revealed his deepest, most intimate feelings in many of the lyrical pieces, the music remains approachable and is often played. It would probably be hard to find the piano student who has not learned to love these lyrical pieces, in spite of their occasional difficulty, and does not feel that the struggle has been worth while, if the results are good. One should ignore the fact that they have at times been looked upon with disdain as inferior. In fact they have survived as music that is both living and vital, because they are so strongly rooted in the consciousness of the people.

The expression *Lyric Pieces* is actually Grieg's own invention, but does not describe a genre. Character-pieces for the piano, with or without descriptive titles, have a long tradition and Grieg is only one to contribute to this, although his contribution is a very important one. Each of his lyric pieces, like Mendelssohn's, *Lieder ohne Worte*, expresses only one mood, one feeling. From the publication of the second book, in 1883, (the first one came out in 1867), he went on to publish collections of lyric pieces at regular intervals, until 1901. They cover the greater part of Grieg's life as an established composer, and represent more or less every single facet of his personal style.

No attempt has been made to hide the fact that the lyric pieces gradually became good business, both for Grieg himself, as well as for the publishers. In a letter to Peters, Grieg called them *Semmeln* - fragrant, fresh-baked, bread - and the fact of the matter is that they were indeed sold like "hot cakes". No wonder the publisher Peters, in London and Frankfurt, was delighted every time Grieg delivered a manuscript for a new album of piano pieces. He was strongly attached to many of these pieces and enjoyed playing them, while there were others that he was not pleased with at all. In a letter to his friend, Emil Horneman, he writes:

My Silence is unforgivable, because I honestly haven't done anything, other than the so called, "Lyric Pieces", which are surrounding me like lice and fleas in the country. (Letter to Emil Horneman, 15th September, 1898)

Other people also made snide remarks about them, such as Debussy's comment that the lyric pieces were like "pink candies filled with snow", probably alluding to the pink covers on the editions of the albums from Peters.

Grieg's *Lyric Pieces* contain 66 compositions, published in ten albums, during the years from 1867 to 1901. Most of these albums were printed again several times, and many of the pieces were published separately. Several of the most popular of them were published in innumerable arrangements, some by Grieg himself, but mostly by others.

In *Book No. 5, Op. 54*, from 1891, Grieg reached a quality which he would never surpass, when we consider the individual collections as a whole. This is also the first book to be called *Lyric Pieces*. Here, we also feel that there is an element which binds them all together. While nature's moods appear to be the main theme of *Opus 43*, in this album the focus of attention is Norwegian peasant life and nature, though not represented by folk-dance inspired pieces, as they were in some of the other collections. It is rather the development of impressions from nature. We do find a *Gangar, No 2*, a folk-dance, and the dance rhythm is of great importance in *Scherzo, No. 5*, but the harmonic and rhythmic details, the way the mood is created, and the general atmosphere in the individual pieces, together, give us the impression that everything is carefully planned. *No. 6, Bellringing*, is one of Grieg's strangest compositions. It was perhaps this piece in particular that he had in mind when he wrote to Dr. Abraham:

A new book of lyric piece is finished, and I have enjoyed myself immensely. [5]

This piece is experimental in its evocation of the ringing of bells and in its use of dynamics. In 1903 Grieg took four of the pieces, Nos. 2, 3, 4 and 6, and arranged them for orchestra, but he was not pleased with the results:

At the time, I am very concerned about the new instrumentation of the 'Lyrical Suite', which Anton Seidl has orchestrated...Seidl's instrumentation was not, however, in the spirit of my intentions, and does not sound like it should, something I discovered last winter in Christiania. [6]

Later, he also changed the name from *Chiming of the Bells* to *Shepherd Boy*. This experiment with sound was too bold even for the composer himself. The end result was the *Lyrical Suite*, which is a good example of Grieg's extraordinary ability to orchestrate.

The next book, the sixth, came out in 1893, as *Opus 57*. In contrast to the previous one, Grieg now returns to the European drawing-room tradition in several of these pieces. In *No. 2, Homesickness*, there is a weak connection with Norwegian folk-music, and Norwegian natural scenery, but the longing is not as convincing as it was in *Opus 43, No. 3*. Neither does he reach the same heights in *Book 7, Op. 62*, from 1895, even though some of his finest lyric pieces are in this collection, notably *Brooklet, No. 4*, and *Homeward, No. 6*. The first of these is one of his most impressionistic compositions, and technically one of the greatest challenges among the *Lyric Pieces*. In the second one, Grieg is once again back in the world of folk-music. Of the above, *Gratitude, No. 2* and *French Serenade, No. 3* are two of the more interesting ones. In *Gratitude* he presents a theme that reminds us of the unpretentious and spontaneous elements in some of his earliest *Lyric Pieces*, which contrast sharply with the harmonically advanced, yet static second section. *No. 1, Vanished Days*, had the title of *Minuette* in the first edition and is yet another example of retrospection, which appeared more and more frequently in his work as the years went by.

1 *Ja, ja es ist, oder besser, es scheint sehr schon mit dieser Popularität, sie ist aber nicht billig. Mein Renommée als Künstler darunter und die Kritik wird gehässig. Glücklicher die Künstler, die nicht bei Lebzeiten die sogenanne Popularität erhalten. Ich kann doch dafür, dass meine Musik in hotellen dritten Ranges und von den Backfischen gespielt wird. Ich habe meine Musik desshalb doch eben so warm empfunden ohne an Publicum zu denken. Sei froh, Du, der Dich Niemand schutzig machte. Werden deine Werke gespielt, dann werden sie gut vorgeführt! Das ist ein grosser Vorzug. Möchte mir doch die bescheiden sein, wo ich weltvergessen für mich und meine Kunst leben könnte!* Letter to Julius Röntgen, London, 25th May, 1906 , qv. Julius Röntgen: *Grieg*, 's-Gravenhage: Kruseman, p.108

2 *In meinen Op. 17 und 66 habe ich Volksweisen für Clavier gesetzt, in Op. 30 dergleichen für Männergesang frei bearbeitet. In drei oder vier meinen übrigen Werke habe ich es versucht, norw. Volksweisen motivisch zu verwenden. Da ich aber bis jetzt 70 veröffentlichte, darf ich wohl sagen, dass Nichts ungerechter ist als die Behauptung gewisser deutscher Kritiker, dass meine sogenannte Originalitet sich auf die Verwendung des Volksliedes beschränkt(!). Dass der Geist des Vaterlandes, welcher in den Volksliedern von jeher einen Ausdruck fand, über mein gesamtes schaffen schwebt, ist etwas Anderes.* Letter to Henry T. Finck, 17th July,1900

3 *A Ravel Reader: Correspondence, articles, interviews*, ed. Arbie Orenstein. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990, p. 237. This story comes from Lionel Carey, *Delius: The Paris Years*, p.56; see also Gille Gérard-Arlberg, *No 6 rue Vercingetorix*, I, Konstrevy, 2, 1958, p.65

4 *Das Reich der Harmonien War immer meine Traumwelt und das Verhältnis meiner harmonischen Empfindungsweise zu der norwegischen Volksweise war mir selbst ein Mysterium. Ich habe gefunden, das dunkle Tiefe unserer Weisen in deren Reichtum an ungeahnten harmonischen Möglichkeiten ihren Grund hat.* Letter to H. T. Finck, 17th July, 1900.

5 *Ein neues Heft Lyrische Stücke liegt fertig und hat mir viel Spass gemacht.* Letter to Dr. Abraham, 17th September, 1891

6 *Ich bin in dieser Zeit mit der Neuinstrumentierung der von Anton Seidl orchestrierten 'Lyrischen Suite' eifrig beschäftigt...Die Instrumentation Seidls war leider nicht meinen Intentionen gemäss und klang nicht, wie sie sollte, was ich diesen Winter in Kristiania erfuhr.* Letter to Heinrichsen, 5th July, 1904.

Einar Steen-Nøkleberg

The Norwegian pianist Einar Steen-Nøkleberg was an early winner of the German High School Piano Competition. Other prizes include the Norwegian Piano Competition in 1972, and in 1975 the Norwegian Critics' Prize for Best Performance, awarded after a performance of Grieg's *Piano Concerto* at the Bergen Festival. In 1976 he was honoured with the Norwegian Recording of the Year for a recital of music by Norwegian Baroque composers. Other awards include the Grieg Prize in 1985 and in 1992. From 1975 to 1981 Einar Steen-Nøkleberg was professor of piano at the Hanover Musikhochschule and in recent years has enjoyed an international career, with recitals throughout Europe, in the United States of America and in the former Soviet Union. His performances of the piano music of Grieg are regarded as particularly authoritative.

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STEREO

DDD

Playing Time: 65'48"

Edvard GRIEG

(1843 - 1907)

Piano Music Vol. 9

Lyric Pieces

Opp. 54, 57 & 62

Einar Steen-Nøkleberg, Piano

1 - 6	**Lyriske stykker, hefte 5, op. 54** **(Lyric Pieces, Book 5, Op. 54)**	(22:47)
7 - 12	**Lyriske stykker, hefte 6, op. 57** **(Lyric Pieces, Book 6, Op. 57)**	(26:39)
13 - 18	**Lyriske stykker, hefte 7, op. 62** **(Lyric Pieces, Book 7, Op. 62)**	(16:01)

(See booklet for details)

Recorded at Lindeman Hall, Norwegian State Academy of Music, Oslo, from 21st to 23rd December, 1993.
Co-Producers: Arild Erikstad, Krysztof Drab and Einar Steen-Nøkleberg
Engineers and Editors: Jørn Pedersen, Morten Lindberg & Victor Engholmen
Music Notes: Øyvind Nordheim (translated by Phyllis Nyquist)

Cover Painting: From North Cape by Peder Balke (The National Gallery, Oslo, Norway)

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NAXOS GRIEG: Piano Music Vol. 9 - Lyric Pieces Opp. 54, 57 & 62 8.553395